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“Sublime Labours”: Blake, Nietzsche and the Notion of the Sublime

I

In *Jerusalem* Blake inscribes the philosophy of sublime into the logic of contraries, the most powerful machinery of his thought. In the frontispiece of an early version of the poem we read that the landscape of Albion is formed by two principal “rocks” of “Sublime and Pathos”¹ which, however, are locked in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, they are seats of so-

The combination of pathos and sublime could possibly signal Blake’s allegiance to the 18th-century aesthetics. In 1696 John Dennis was “led to reduce art to the expression of passion”, and in this way “the sublime and the pathetic begin their long journey in each other’s company”.

(W.H. Monk, *The Sublime. A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (New York: 1935), p. 46)

olidity, foundational rocks upon which things can be built (“fix’d in the Earth”, J. 1.4), but — on the other hand — they are not readily available as such, their solidity is suppressed by the “Spectrous Power” of “reason” which “covers them above”. There are, at least, two important consequences of such a positioning of sublime. First, its foundational, ordinary, character must be validated by its Other — in this case the pathetic;

if sublime is at the beginning of things then it is a beginning already doubled and divided (it is important to mark this initial dependence of sublime on the Other, as we shall come back to this crucial relationship later on). Second, the geological placing of the two rocks implies that a considerable effort and investment of energy must be made in order to excavate them from

¹All the quotations from Blake come from *William Blake: Complete Writings*, ed. G. Keynes (Oxford: 1969) and are marked either by the initial of the title of a prophetic book followed by the plate and line number, or — in case of minor texts — by the letter K and the page reference.

underneath layers of soil, i.e. rationalist disfigurement. Thus, sublime must be penetrated into or towards, it is not readily available on the surface, and the ontological setting of the frontispiece which speaks of "a Void outside of Existence" which, in turn, "becomes a Womb" relegates this penetration both to the sphere of sexuality and a primeval territory of formative movements. We may refer to this realm as to a region of 'onto-geology'.

Sublime qualifies the boundary realm between 'being' and 'not being', the domain where a yet unformed entity acquires the status of a 'thing' (a movement and change from a "Void" to a "Womb") without losing sight of the nothing and absence which it carries at its center (here, after Lacan², one could claim that sublime is a rediscovery of the signifier which is a representation of a certain absence). But it also carries energies of the movement of rocks, in short — of a cataclysmic earthquake. This 'onto-geological' interpretation of sublime can be looked upon as Blake's philosophical rendition of the popular

"... if we consider the whole surface of it [the earth] ... 'tis as a broken and confus'd heap of bodies, plac'd in no order to one another, nor with any correspondence or regularity of parts ... They [moon and earth] are ... the image or picture of a great Ruine, and have a true aspect of a World lying in its rubbish".

(T. Burnet, *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, (London: 1684), p. 109)

aesthetics of the romantic northern sublime of ragged mountains and contorted landscapes (itself founded, in part, upon Burnet's 1684 *Sacred Theory of the Earth*), but also — more importantly — it is supported by Blake's theology of a God suffering and compassionate rather than a God triumphant and punishing ("The long sufferings of God are not for ever"). A discovery of the sublime is matched not with mere awe and stasis of astonishment but with the dynamic of suffering and distortion.

II

The placement of the sublime at the junction of 'being' and 'not-being', in the territory of 'onto-geology', is strategic because it enforces the sublime as the most central power in Blake's aesthetics and his critical assessment of Western philosophy³. Thus, the "sublime labours" about which Blake speaks in Plate 10 of *Jerusalem* refer partly to his efforts to create a new philosophical discourse which would overcome the strict distinctions of genres and result in the hybridic form of 'Philosophy as Art', or 'Art as Philosophy', a discourse based not upon merely rational inferment but, primarily, upon the aesthetic

² See, e.g. J. Lacan, *Seminaire III* (Paris: Seuil, 1981).

³ On the topic of Blake and sublime see V. de Luca, *Words of Eternity. Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime* (Princetown: Princeton University Press, 1991).

contemplation and practice of the everyday. The reverence for the Other implies ethical response founded upon necessarily aesthetic recognition of the Other's separateness. Thus, Blake's theory of the outline plays such a vital role in his system.

In his annotations to Reynolds' *Discourses* Blake radically opposes his adversary's view according to which the "grand style" consists in the escape from the „Gothic manner which attends to the minute accidental discriminations of particular ... objects" and locates "sublimity" precisely in the area of "discriminations"; "All Sublimity is founded on Minute Discriminations" (K, 453). Sublime marks then three significant moments in man's conceptualization of the world: first, it enforces a certain theory of arts based on the ontological importance of outline; second, it postulates the end of the universal, all inclusive knowledge opening, instead, the space for a new protocol of knowledge forming in which centrality is replaced by the periphery, and one supreme narration of the system substituted by local stories of particular objects ("To Generalize is to be an idiot. To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit. General Knowledges are those knowledges, that Idiots possess", K, 451); third, it emphasizes the role of the individual vis à vis the systematic, the impulsive vis à vis the reasoning ("I have always found that Angels have the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise; this they do with a confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning", K, 157). It is surprising that Blake mercifully chose not to comment at length of the passage in the same Discourse in which the survey of the "grand style" is preceded by the oath of loyalty to the political regime and social establishment. Paving the way for praising the authorities for opening the Royal Academy as the place of artistic formation, Reynolds speaks of "a general desire among our nobility to be distinguished by lovers and judges of the arts", and then hastens to praise the Monarch (George III) for his generosity urging the artists to show their gratitude: „let us shew our gratitude in our diligence, that ... at least ... our industry may deserve his protection"⁴. Evidently, for Blake, for whom "the tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction" (K, 152), such a pledge of allegiance was bound to produce not only politically but, first of all, aesthetically devastating results which privileged the art of blurred chiaroscuro (Titian, and the Venetians) over that of the clear outline (Rafael). Hence, the three principal domains of sublime — aesthetic, epistemological (philosophical), and political — coalesce into one: theory (and practice) of *Minute Particulars*.

⁴J. Reynolds, *Discourses on Art* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 6.

III

Minute Particulars lead to a philosophy of the body which is based on (1) its liberation from the powers of ideological disfigurement, and (2) the sublimation of the body's understanding as merely a conglomerate of physiologically specialized organs. Blake's sublime is that of the body but conceived of in a special way, as the body radically naked, i.e. a body refusing to identify its own, ultimate nakedness with the sexual. What is perceived as the sexual liberation and 'baring' of the body is, according to Blake, merely a clever attempt at imposing an ideological "veil" (a frequent term in Blake's books) neutralizing the revolutionary nudity of man's body. Blake's is not the desexualized body, but a body whose sexuality remains more mysterious and open, more 'naked', thus not restricted to the genital zone, a body of alternative sexualities (in the plural) — a body sublime which differentiates its sexual practices refusing to identify and lock them in the sphere of the genital.

In Plate 69 of *Jerusalem* Blake surrounds the crucial claim that "Every Minute Particular is Holy" (J, 69, 42) with the images of two kinds of sexuality. First, he presents us with the "jealous" and "murderous" sexuality of Rahab, the ancient whore of Babylon, which inscribes the body into social economy (marriage as a system of social exchange: "The Female searches sea & land for gratifications to the/Male Genius, who in return clothes her in gems & gold") and restrictive, conventional law ("A Religion of Chastity, forming a Commerce to sell Loves", see also *The system of Moral Virtue named Rahab*, J. 39, 10). Second, Blake depicts the body of Beulah and of "the sanctuary of Eden", where "Embraces are Cominglings from the Head even to the Feet", i.e. where the holiness of "Minute Particulars" is opposed to the false pathetic or "pomposity" of Generalized Knowledge ("a pompous High Priest").

One should also note how the sublime body of displaced sexuality is implicated in the philosophy of outline. On the one hand, it is totally dependent on the contour and circumference ("For the Sanctuary of Eden is in the Camp, in the Outline", J, 69. 41), on the other hand, however, its power seems to transcend the limitations of the visual outline. We learn that "the Circumference still expands going forward to Eternity" (J, 71. 8), from which we can infer that the experience of the sublimity of the everyday is conditioned by two things; first, by the recognition of the difference, and second — by the acknowledgment of the fact that, when absolutized, this rule can turn into its own parody, into the Cartesianism of the subject contemplating external objects (whereas the sublime seems to be a science of *difference* in which there can be no subject prior to the otherness of objects).

At this moment a theory of sublime must touch upon a theory of the self: in Blake's version, the road towards sublime must be opened by a radical

critique of the *Selfish Center* (J, 71. 7). Thus, despite obvious associations with closure, Blake's outline does not homogenize a thing, does not turn it into a centralized entity, but just the opposite — it introduces within it openness

One could remark that such a link between sublime and self is noticeable in Lacan's philosophy of self as conditioned by the Other which always carries within itself a suspicion of sublime 'vastness' which prevents us from getting to know it: "'You are my wife'... 'you are my master'... What creates the founding value of those words is that what is aimed at in the message, as well as what is manifest in the pretence, is that the Other is there qua absolute Other. Absolute, i.e. he is recognised, but is not known".

(J. Lacan, *Le séminaire Livre III. Les Psychoses* (Paris: 1981, p. 48).

dychotomies. The movement towards the sublime body is then a trajectory above sexuality ("Humanity is far above sexual organization", J, 79. 73), but not outside it ("In Beulah the, Female lets down her beautiful tabernacle/Which the Male enters magnificent between her Cherubim/And becomes One with, her ...", J, 30. 34—36).

IV

To dismantle the unequivocal and mistifying image of human sexuality as a domain of unproblematic gratification, to turn it towards the sublime body, Blake speaks about it not only in terms of pleasure but, first of all, of hard work. When, at the beginning of *Jerusalem*, Los forces his Spectre to work with him, the stakes are double: to create an option for the philosophy of life as, to borrow a term from Nietzsche, a kind of "Joyful Wisdom" ("That Enthusiasm and Life may not cease", J, 9. 31; in *Annotations to Reynolds* we find a most general formula of this philosophy: "Enthusiasm is All in All", K, 456), and to open a perspective for the future rejuvenation of Albion by the "Sons and Daughters of Jerusalem to be" (J, 10. 3).

We learn right away that neither of the two purposes is attainable by means of either frivolous reflection of academic philosophy, or through an act of sexual union. The limitations of both are serious. The former tries to cover up, through ideological manouvers, the true reality of "Contraries" neutralized by the binarism of dychotomic divisions ("They take the Two Contraries ... they

and the space for "expansion" which instantly derails the object from its route towards the center and turns it towards unexpected margins and peripheries. The sublime body is necessarily founded upon the difference, the fundamental necessity of the Other, but it is not a difference stabilized and petrified, identifiable as the 'sexual' or 'psychological' difference, but a moving, ceaseless differentiation which prevents man from absolutizing the physiology of his/her body's organs on the way towards the discovery of the true 'nakedness' of the body above

name them Good & Evil; From them they make an Abstract, which is a Negation", J, 10. 8—10; in a concise formula, we deal with the "Abstract Philosophy warring in enmity against Imagination", J, 5. 68). The latter attempts to bypass the drama of sexuality by means of its reduction to either reproduction or mere pleasure which, in the latter case, subjects it to the punitive machinery of the moral law ("Every Emanative joy forbidden, as a Crime", J, 9. 14).

To counter such reductionist approaches Blake focuses on the philosophy of labour giving us, more than six decades before Nietzsche, his own version of "philosophizing with a hammer" which the German thinker describes in the preface to the *Twilight of Idols*. Los is presented as a cosmic blacksmith ("Out from the Furnaces of Los ... A pillar of smoke writhing afar into Non-Entity, Till the cloud reaches ... the Starry Wheels", J, 5.50—52), the master of the forge ("The Bellows & the Hammers moved compell'd by Los's hand", J, 10. 6), the wielder of the hammer and furnaces ("Loud roar my Furnaces and loud my hammer is heard", J, 9. 25), and — last but not least — a commanding force ("Groaning the Spectre heav'd the bellows, obeying Los's frowns", J, 9. 33).

Blake's/Los's philosophy of the hammer is the impassioned, eroticized thought of "sublime Labours" (J, 10. 65) resulting in two actions: architectural construction of the city of Golgonooza, and the sexual generation of "his Sons & Daughters";

Yet ceas'd he [Los] not from labouring at the roarings of his Forge,
With iron & brass Building Golgonooza in great contendings,
Till his Sons & Daughters came forth from the Furnaces
At the sublime Labours ...

(J, 10. 62—65)

If we could trace the reasons why the labours are qualified as "sublime", we would be in a position to see further implications of this adjective in Blake's theory going beyond its already hinted foundation in the notions of the "outline" and "Minute Particulars". First, the labours are designed to curb the raging power of unrestricted reason represented by the Spectre itself. Even a cursory investigation of Blake's thought, however, reveals that his reservations concern not so much reason as such (in *Jerusalem* Blake speaks of the "Holy Reasoning Power" J, 10. 13), but its abuse resulting from its emancipation or alienation from other cognitive faculties. Los's forge is a place where the Spectre is again forced to co-operate, i.e. to abandon its haughty independence described by Blake as "Abomination of Desolation" (J, 10. 16). "Sublime" action is possible when reason is subjected to Poetic Imagination, when the Spectre "heaves the bellows obeying Los's frowns".

Second, such an epistemological turn is implicated in ethical consequences. Sublimity is a movement away from the "desolation" introduced by the emancipated and insulated reason. If we remember that the term 'desolation'

speaks of a land unfit for living, friendless, inhospitable, and ruined, we will be able to see why in the passage quoted above the forge and the roaring hammer announce, in an almost Heideggerian manner, a philosophy of not only sexuality but — first of all — dwelling. While creating his "Sons & Daughters" Los constructs the city of Golgonooza, i.e. a place of hospitality and conviviality. In fine, "desolation" eliminates the Other, redounds to the rigidity of human selfhood, whereas Golgonooza revives the presence of the Other and, hence, makes a turn towards sublime possible. One could argue that Blake's sublime, by betraying the characteristic features of the Romantic sublimity embodied so dramatically in Friedrich's painting *A Monk by the Sea* (man's loneliness and fragility vis-à-vis the elemental powers of nature, the case illustrating particularly well Kant's famous dictum that we should look for sublime in nature⁵) is interpretable mainly in ethical categories, as a rediscovery of the founding role of the Other in the construction of the human subject. This reading is not only supported by a famous Proverb of Hell according to which "The most sublime act is to set another before you" (K, 151), but also by the process of devolution of humanity under the impact of the Reasoning Power which neutralizes the Other not by its total erasure but, much more treacherously, by the substitution of the Other by the inauthentic and reproducible replica. In Blake's categories: imagination is eliminated — in the sphere of the relationship with the Other — by memory:

But Albion fell down, a Rocky fragment from Eternity hurl'd
By his own Spectre, who is the Reasoning Power in every Man,
Into his own Chaos, which is the Memory between Man & Man.

(J, 54. 6—8)

In other words, the ethical sublime consists in the ability to avoid formlessness, or if we could coin a neologism — 'unformedness' (*Chaos*) — without, however, petrifying in the solidity of a 'separate', 'unrelated' identity without the Other. This moment of transition, or 'shuttling' between the formed and unformed (in this context we should also remember Blake's phrase from *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, where he speaks of the human being as of one who "knows no fixed lot", K, 193) is the key factor in the ethical sublime necessarily leading to the implantation of the aesthetic dimension into the domain of ethics, since the act of the "sublime Labour", of hammering one's self, is the act of imagination or artistic creation opposing a merely reproductive operation of "Memory".

Third, such a philosophy of self brings us back to human sexuality. At the beginning of *Jerusalem* Blake gives his definition of the sexes as: "The Male is a Furnace of beryll; the Female is a golden Loom" (J, 5. 33) which corresponds

⁵ See I. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, sec. 27.

with the 'hammering' and 'shuttling' activities outlined above. Los's "sublime Labours" result in the generation of his "Sons & Daughters", and the adjective "sublime" describes less a 'specialized' genital operation but, rather, seems to refer to the extension of the sexual over all the areas of human body and life. Neither is it insignificant that the "Furnaces" produce also Erin, Blake's representative of free love whose praise he sang in *Vision of the Daughters of Albion*. Eroticization of existence (not to be mixed with its 'genitalization') is an important undercurrent in Blake's version of the sublime.

Fourth, sublimity also qualifies a certain state of "labour" in a society. Acknowledging the importance of Blake's philosophy of work, which cannot be approached in this essay, we can only briefly point out that the "Furnaces" of Los, i.e. of eroticized existence of the outlined — but not fixed — self, stand in opposition to "dark Satanic Mills" introduced by Blake in the Preface to *Milton*. The latter represent the enslaved labour of the early days of Industrial Revolution which confines both man's body (hence, in *Four Zoas* Blake argues for the liberation of industrial slaves: "Let the slave, grinding at the mill, run out into the field", FZ, 9. 670) and — more importantly — mind ("doomed to the sullen contemplation, men in their innermost brain/Feeling the crushing Wheels... write the bitter words/Of Stern Philosophy ...", FZ, 9. 818—820). On the other hand, Los' "Furnaces" stand for the technology not necessarily lighter or less demanding in terms of human effort (we know that "Los compell'd the invisible Spectre to labours mighty with vast strength", J, 10. 65), but the labour, although hard and enforced, is sublimated by its purpose, i.e. a construction of New Jerusalem ("Los works hard for Jerusalem's sake", J, 11.9). In fine, the sublime also implies the liberation of labour not from the stress of manual work but, first of all, from the confines and restrictions of false ideology which reifies and mechanizes man's thought.

V

Nietzsche, like Blake, would disagree with Kant's conviction that it is in nature where man should look for the examples of the sublime. Blake's "sublime Labours" were meant to emphasize the ontological, epistemological, and social status of the sublime which is to redefine human life in terms of excess and eroticized thought. Similarly, Nietzsche would begin with the following reservation: distinguishing sharply between sublime and beautiful (we should remember Blake's distinction between the "rock of sublime" and "the rock of pathetic") he speaks of the latter in terms of a "dream" (*Traum*), whereas he

Similarly, de Luca speaks of Blake's "eroticized conception of intellect" and defines sublime poetry as one which "addresses the Intellectual Powers by furnishing them with forms of desire, with an ongoing enticement that releases the uncurbed emanation of passion".

(V. de Luca, *Words of Eternity. Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime* (Princeton:1991), p. 29)

We have to note that the philosopher approaches beauty and sublime applying to them terms well known from his early text on *The Birth of Tragedy* and central to all of his philosophy. *Traum* brings us to the Apollonian, while *Rausch* speaks on behalf of the Dionysian. Nietzsche seems to be making a point that beautiful belongs to the God of light and sanity, whereas sublime has been appropriated by the frenzy of the God of wine and madness, a conclusion justified by the final section of the same aphorism: "Das Schöne und das Licht, das Erhabene und das Dunkel" (N I, aph. 32).

When it comes to answering the question whether sublime is inherent to nature ("Ist das Erhabene der Natur eigentümlich") Nietzsche's reaction is negative: it turns towards the notions of "will" (*Willen*) and "measure" (*Mass*). Sublime, unlike beautiful, is generated by the "excessive will" (*das Übermass des Willens*), and by the "overloaded instinct" (*überladenen Triebe*). Sublimity consists in transcending the "measure" which, especially in relation with "will", seems to aim at pointing out the withering of the foundations of the Western subject. First of all, man is no longer 'measurable', i.e. identifiable as a separate and discreet unit in perfect control over both itself (the 'de-genderization' of the pronoun seems important here) and the world. Rather, human subject is now viewed as a temporary and superficial, Apollonian, sovereignty of the conscious over the unconscious. The sovereignty which must necessarily be overturned, and in this respect Nietzsche's philosophy of "revaluation of all values" (also the revaluation of the accepted hierarchy between the conscious and unconscious) is a philosophy of the sublime. If Nietzsche claims that it is the *Übermass des Willens* that brings the experience of the sublime, it is tantamount to saying that the sublime stems from the regions of human

addresses the former as the "intoxication" (*Rausch*). In the notes we read that if one accepts the view that beauty resides in "the dream of Being" then, automatically, he will have to look at the sublime as a case of "the intoxication of Being" ("Wem das Schöne auf einem Traum des Wesens beruht, so das Erhabene auf, einem Rausch des Wesens"⁶).

⁶ F. Nietzsche, *Nachlass I*, (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, Verlag, 1943), aph. 32. Nietzsche's work will be referred to by means of the following abbreviations followed by the aphorism number: Z — *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, D — *Daybreak*, N I — *Nachlass I*, N II, *Nachlass II*, GS — *Gay Science*, WP — *Will to Power*, KGV — *Nietzsche Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, e.g. G. Colli and M. Montinari (in this case the first number refers to *Abteilung*, the second to the *Band*, and the third to the appropriate fragment).

subjectivity well beyond what Blake would describe as "Selfhood", and that "intoxication" or "ecstasy" (*Rausch*) are figurative modes of making the sublime available to language and thought. If, for Schopenhauer and Kant, sublime spells the essential fissure in the human self which 'fearlessly' observes itself watch something fearful (a sea-storm, for instance), then for the author of *The Birth of Tragedy* sublime marks the rediscovery not so much of a divided ego but of a self which keeps endlessly differentiating from itself, a self for which the split form of two entities is yet too specific and too definite, the abysmal self which — through this differentiation process — radically overcomes the Apollonian *principium individuationis*.

The category of sublime describes a subject which goes beyond the "measure" of its own limits, i.e. one which refuses to place itself in the territory of appropriateness, both in the sense of ontology (sublime refers to the self which is always different, always belongs 'somewhere else', is always 'im- proper') and economy (sublime excludes the use of possessive pronouns: "will", which according to traditional concepts of self constitutes one of its most characteristic features, in Nietzsche evidently belongs to the fundamental process of becoming over which the self extends only a very limited dominion).

Sublimity belongs to the domain of terror both ontologically (as it unconceals the abysmal structure of existence) and aesthetically (as it spells the end of the era of the normative aesthetics of the Age of Reason, but simultaneously overcomes the Romantic aesthetics originating — as the philosopher claims in the 370 aphorism of *The Gay Science* — from "impoverishment" rather than from "overabundance" of instincts).

The abysmality of existence does not signify, however, the disappearance of self (such a claim qualifies in Nietzsche as a romantic yearning for "rest, stillness... and redemption from self", GS, ap. 370), but rather its totally different perception along the lines of "eternal return". When, in the same note quoted from *Nachlass*, Nietzsche speaks about sublimity and will, he links them with the idea of *Unermesslichkeit* ("Die schaurige Empfindung den Unermesslichkeit des Willens") to emphasize that neither self nor sublime can be exhausted in the traditional "measures" of 'ego' and 'identity'.

VI

It is precisely the doctrine of "eternal recurrence" that reveals the abysmality of being in Nietzsche's thought. Without even trying to approach the intricacies of the notion, let us only point out that *Wiederkunft* is not

Alan Schrift interprets eternal return in a similar mode: "... what is essentially at issue is not the fact of the eternal recurrence ..., but the thought of the eternal recurrence, e.g. the thought that one commits oneself to performing eternally the actions that one chooses".

(A. Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation* (New York: 1990), p. 70)

a return of the same, an exact repetition of an occurrence, but — rather — it is our willingness and readiness to accept the very possibility of things happening to us over and over again. Such a readiness evidently bespeaks the affirmative attitude towards reality and thus introduces a dramatic change into

our being which is radically transformed by the very acceptance of what Nietzsche calls in *Ecce homo* "amor fati". In other words, the affirmative, joyful self is never at ease with itself, since — having affirmed the recurrence — it has become essentially different from itself. *Wiederkunft* is then a thought of the self's radical non-identity, fundamental non-synonymity with itself. Like in Blake's doctrine of exuberance and excess, the eternal recurrence speaks of the overabundant self, or of the *Übermensch*.

Such a thought implies that even the concept of sublimity cannot be used as a final description of a new self. Hence, in Nietzsche, the sublime must necessarily be overcome: if the *Übermass des Willens* is to lead to *Übermensch*, then it must go through the stage of *Überwindung* (overcoming). The story of sublime in Nietzsche is 'un-measured' in the movement between the three *ÜBER*-. The first implication of this linguistic topography is that, despite the semantic temptation to read in the *ÜBER* a story of the extraordinary and unusual, Nietzsche painstakingly tries to reveal that — paradoxically — it operates in the sphere of the everyday. In another notebook remark the philosopher says that, when doing what one wants to do, one should avoid "lofty words", i.e. avoidance of the rhetorical sublime seems to be a precondition of the sublime experience of will: "Sein Liebtet tun, ohne es mit hohen Worten zu nennen — kann Heroismus sein Scham vor den erhabenen Gebärden" (N, II, aph. 566). Paradoxically, for Nietzsche, the very nature of sublime seems to reside in a recurrent movement between the everyday, the estrangement from it, followed by a return to the *heimlich*; the 'un-measured' can be approached only by means of a "measure". There is necessarily a sense of 'thrownness' in the experience of sublime, of being at the mercy of some unidentifiable power, but also — if sublime is to run its full course — it must overcome its 'thrownness' and create its own existential architecture. Both Blake and Nietzsche emphasize this architectural turn in the sublime, and in both of them it is a move towards a new sense of dwelling in which the aesthetic would merge with the ethical and ontological. Hence, the city of Golgonooza which is being forged in the Furnaces of Los, and Nietzsche's sense of the necessity of 'do-

The process of the necessary domestication of the sublime, of learning how to be at home in a setting which denies 'at-homeness' resembles the relationship between man and meaning in Lacan: "Meaning is the fact that the human being isn't master of this primordial, primitive language. He has been thrown into it ... Here man isn't master in his own house".

(J. Lacan, *Le séminaire. Livre II*, (Paris:1978), p. 307).

mestication' of sublime: "Wer im Erhabenen nicht zu Hause ist, fühlt das Erhabene als etwas Unheimliches und Falsches" (N, I, aph. 780). The sublime can only be experienced as its own overcoming: we know what it is, when we begin to feel 'at home' with it, although the very tradition of sublime defines it as exactly the experience of not 'being at home with something'.

The overcoming (*Überwindung*) is signalled in *The Daybreak* where Nietzsche warns us that sublimity can be frequently falsified by pretentious neglect of the natural suppressed by the spiritual. In this sense we can say that a false sublime, i.e. a not overcome sublime results from a certain — as Heidegger would have put it — *forgetfulness of Being*. As we can clearly see from the 261 aphorism of *The Daybreak*, the sublime can be overcome by its own critique as a movement only apparently ennobling man by transporting him to some more lofty areas of being. When Nietzsche strips man of the pretences of divinity and rediscovers the animal in him (in the aforementioned aphorism he speaks of the "animal", *Getier*, which pretentiously walks on two legs, whereas it is much more natural on all fours), he launches a vitriolic attack on Kant and Schopenhauer for whom sublime consisted in the intimation of immortality, in the "supersensible side of our being" (*Critique of Judgement*, sec. 27).

The first step in experiencing sublime consists in recognizing its false pretences, i.e. in emphasizing that a true sublime can only be available as a sublime a *rebours* (not a "god", but an "animal" in man). The next stage is opened by a shock of this discovery. The not overcome sublime has a tendency to produce a satisfied man, a man who is "free, strong, broad, peaceful, and gay" (*frei, fest, breit, ruhig, heiter*, N I, aph. 779), whereas the principle of the Dionysian philosophy of the disturbed *principium individuationis* demands the shattering of the limits of such a self.

This can be achieved through the experience of the "perfect beauty" (*Vollkommenen Schönen*) which excruciates and deranges one's self. Like in his theory of tragedy where Dionysus had to, ultimately, speak the language of Apollo, the sublime, when filtered from false and pathetic elements, will become the paralyzing force of the beautiful. In a *Nachlass* note we read: "Der Mensch des Erhabenen wird beim Anblick des Erhabenen frei, breit, ruhig, heiter; aber der Anblick des Vollkommnen Schönen erschüttert ihm und wirft ihn um: vor ihm verneint er sich selbes", N, I aph. 779). The violent rhetoric of "shattering" (*erschüttert*), "rejection" (*umwerfen*), and "negation" (*verneinen*) makes one aware that a true sublime must be overcome and brought to the area of the radically beautiful (what is at stake is not just merely "beautiful" but "perfectly beautiful").

The completion of this process of *Überwindung* is presented in the 13th chapter of the second book of *Zarathustra* appropriately entitled "On the sublime ones" (*Von den Erhabenen*). A sublime person is the embodiment of a false, i.e. not overcome, sublime which does not remain in any relationship with beauty and which represents the force of the pathetic Nietzsche was alluding to in the passage from *The Daybreak* quoted above. Now, the sublime man is referred to not as a fake divinity ("wie ein Gott", D, aph. 261), but as a "penitent of spirit" (*einen Büsser des Geistes*). This description introduces the sublime man into the heart of the epistemological debate taking place in Nietzsche's works. The "penitent of spirit" is one who adheres to the model of science which focuses on the security and stability of truth. Not *überwunden* sublime represents the Cartesian model of the lofty thinking responsible for 'transporting' man to the 'heights' of cognition.

But it is precisely this model which Nietzsche attacks in his books accusing it of absolutising one point of view as well as mistifying the role of language in the process of knowledge formation. We see now why the "penitent of spirit" is laden with "ugly truths" (*Behängt mit hässlichen Wahrheiten*): for Nietzsche, it is indispensable to underscore the fact that his new, "joyful" knowledge, the knowledge of the overcome sublime, deals not with truths but with values. The overcoming of sublime, like the overturning of the knowledge of Bacon, Newton, and Locke in Blake's thought, implies a movement towards "lightness" (see the importance of the metaphore of dance for both thinkers) and art. In Blake, the latter takes the form of a most intricate theory of imagination which becomes a metaphysical nature of man's being ("Art is the Tree of Life ... Science is a Tree of Death", K, 777); similarly, we can learn from Nietzsche that "art is the greatest *stimulans* of life" (WP, 808) and that "our fundamental intellectual life" is nothing else but a "spontaneous play of phantasizing force", KGV, V, 1:10). It cannot surprise us then that the "penitent of spirit", i.e. the unovercome sublime, does not locate itself on the level of "taste" and "liking" (*Geschmack und Schmecken*), and therefore turns out to be the enemy of life itself which, as we learn from the same chapter of *Zarathustra*, is unthinkable without debates over taste.

The first movement, however, leads us away from the "spirit of the heavy" (*Geist der Schwere*, Z, III:11) towards the new knowledge represented not

Monk notices that already Montaigne "laments the loss of the sublime ... and he blames this state of affairs on 'this new philosophy, which tells only of general laws', and which speaking only of 'pure understanding, of clear ideas, of reasons, of principles' neglects imagination ..."

(W. H. Monk, *The Sublime...*, p. 55)

by merely rational inference and experiment assuming the fundamental split between subject/object and mind/body, but by the non-dychotomic, physiological or — rather — BIO-logical response of laughter. The two movements are strictly connected in Nietzsche and, hence, when presenting

the "penitent of spirit", he can point out in one sentence that he mastered neither laughter nor beauty (*Noch lernte er das Lachen nicht und die Sch6mheit*), and as a result 'sad left the forest of cognition" (*Wald6 der Erkenntnis*).

The overcoming of sublime implies then a corrective of the cognitive by the aesthetic (art more important than knowledge: "Art is worth more than truth", WP, aph. 853), and then another sanative procedure — this time of the aesthetic by the biological (life more important than art: "We possess art lest we perish of the truth", WP, aph. 822, i.e. art has such an enormous value because it is the saving power of life). Such a critique of the sublime, like in Blake, involves a certain psychological model of man. For Blake, the ideal was provided by the creative impulse identified with disinstitutionalized Christianity (A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect: the Man or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian, K, 776); Nietzsche, a violent critic of the Christian tradition, presents his model as that of man freed from the internalised pressures of ideology. This essential point acquires a most complete metaphorical representation at the very beginning of *Zarathustr6* in the famous parable of metamorphoses (*Von den drei Verwandlungen*) in which man's transformation is pursued from the stage of the camel to that of the child, but in the context of Nietzsche's discussion of sublime a more physiological equivalent is used. "The penitent of spirit" is a "tense soul" (*gespannte Seele*), i.e. one unable to experience joy and paralyzed by the restrictions of preconceived ideas. Thus, the overcoming of sublime implies a relaxation of the muscular tension (*mit l6ssigen Muskeln*) of the body.

The problem with the sublime seems, for Nietzsche, to consist in the fact that in its classic formulations (like in Kant, Burke, or Hegel) it remains too restrictive and well-defined (too muscularily "tense"), too foreseeable and normative, whereas the sublime must reject all thought of self-identity. Sublime is what is more than itself, what — never satisfied with itself — goes beyond itself (that is why Nietzsche could talk about a 'strong' but 'relaxed' body without tension), and therefore overcoming must be its essential prerequisite (hence even will, Nietzsche's crucial concept, must be overmastered by a new hero), but such a placing of the sublime inevitably turns it into beautiful. Thus in the chapter "On the sublime ones" the philosopher can claim that the sublime man must actualize his/her desire not in "satisfaction" (*Satttheit*) but in "Beauty" which is defined in terms opposite to the traditional presentation of the sublime; no longer do we undergo a movement upwards towards 'invisible' heights, an ascent, no longer do we speak of 'transportation' to the 'heights' but — contrariwise — about a descent, a movement downwards towards the visibility (*Sichtbare*): Nietzsche clearly defines beautiful as a "descent towards

That in this movement Nietzsche betrays romantic principles of sublimity becomes evident from this presentation of the romantic sublime which focuses on the exactly opposite turn of sublime: "The moment of the sublime is that moment before the visible dissolves and with it the poet's ability to make sense of impressions in words".

(J. Twitchell, *Romantic Horizons. Aspects of the Sublime in English Poetry and Painting, 1770-1850* (Columbia: 1983), p. 16)

visibility" ("Wenn die Macht, gnädig wird herabkommt ins Sichtbare: Schönheit heisse, ich solches Herabkommen") which radically opposes Kant's "supersensuality" and speaks of Nietzsche's attachment to the everyday which, in turn, in Heidegger's interpretation means that "the sensuous stands in a higher place and is more genuinely than the supersensuous"⁷.

In the same chapter of *Zarathustra* Nietzsche suggests that the direction of the metamorphosis taking place in the overcome sublime leads us away from sublime itself towards the elevated. Man should be "elevated" rather than "sublime", *Gehobener* not *Erhabener*. This positioning of the sublime as a new, redirected elevation in which sublime is transformed into beautiful is also manifest in Nietzsche's presentation of "grand style" as the supreme example of the art of the Dionysian *Rausch*. According to the paradoxical nature of such a sublime (which can be such only after having turned into beautiful), the grand style is defined as precisely the domain of "measure", although this measure is not a mere intermediary between the extremes. Grand style occurs where there takes place "a triumph over the plenitude of living things; where measure becomes master" (WP, 819). A long detour brings us back to the question of *Mass* with which we started; this time, however, only to point out that there can be no art possible without a measure, and thus that sublime MUST be overcome partly for philosophical and ethical reasons (as clearing the way for a new type of consciousness ready to accept and say YES to the destabilizing paradoxes of becoming rather than sanctify the immobilizing logic of being) and partly for the reasons of the

logic of aesthetic production which is founded upon the abysmal and unmeasurable flight/fall following the death of God (see, *The Gay Science*, aph. 125), but which can depict and think this new situation of humanity only by reintroducing the idea of measure which allows both chaos and law to unfold. The new measure of the

Similarly, Alexander Nehamas notices that "Nietzsche would not accept Aristotle's view that moderation ... consists in a mean between excess and defect: these are for him the materials through which a higher synthesis, which he sometimes calls 'the grand style', may emerge".

(A. Nehamas, *Nietzsche. Life as Literature*, (Cambridge Mass.: 1985), p. 193)

overcome sublime, i.e. of the new beautiful, represents precisely this *Mass* which, remaining itself beyond measure (*unermesslich*), conditions both disarray and order, the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

⁷ M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume One: The Will to Power as Art*, English trans. D. Krell (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 198.